Meeting the Met Office’s Thai Cave rescue hero

Description

The rescue of the 12 Thai boys and their football coach from the flooded cave complex they had been trapped in for days captured the world’s imagination last month.

The heroic rescue team was assembled from the handful of people throughout the world with the incredibly specialist skills and experience needed – and one of them works for the Met Office.

When 27 year-old Josh Bratchley isn’t performing superhuman subterranean feats, he is an Operational Meteorologist, based at RAF Valley in Anglesey. We caught up with Josh just after he returned from a reception for the British members of the dive team at 10 Downing Street…

So, Josh – where to start? Do you get up to this sort of thing a lot?

Well, two of my biggest hobbies are caving and cave-diving, so yes, I spend quite a lot of time in cold water underground!

I have trained for years with the UK Cave Diving Group, which is the oldest amateur diving club in the world. I'd only recently returned in April from an expedition to the cave systems under the Sierra Mazateca mountains in Mexico, where we were camping for over a week at a time in caverns beyond flooded passages.

Josh in action in Mexico

How did you come to be involved in the rescue?

There is a relatively small international community of cave divers, so in fact a lot of us know each other anyway. The harsh conditions of UK cave diving sites meant British divers had a lot of suitable skills for the conditions likely to be experienced in the Thai rescue – like zero visibility in awkward passages, and strong currents. It was a situation that demanded high levels of adaptability and calm under all circumstances, so trust among members of the dive team was very important.

The Thai government requested assistance from the British Cave Rescue Council. Rick and John, two of the divers requested by name at the very beginning, were the ones who first found the children alive. Canadian and European divers who live in Thailand were also called up, and the British team asked for two Australian cave divers who are also medical professionals to join them.

So how much notice did you have before you had to leave Wales?

It wasn't that simple actually, I was mountaineering in the Italian Dolomites when the call came, asking if I could be on a plane to Bangkok within 24 hours. I went to the nearest international airport within an hour to book the next flight back to the UK.

That sounds like the start of an action movie! How long were you travelling for?

I landed at Gatwick at 11pm and I was driven to North Wales by one British Cave Rescue team and back to Heathrow by another. Then I flew via Bangkok to Chiang Rai, where I was met by the Thai police. I think it was about 36 sleepless hours in the end!

That would have been enough for me – then you had to go into an underground river?!

Yes, I was directly involved in the operation as a cave rescue diver, working in the dive team to get the children out one at a time. It was an extremely high pressure situation which required undisturbed concentration, so unsurprisingly I didn't have any time to photograph events!

Caverns under the Sierra Mazateca mountains in Mexico

I think we'll let you off that one. When you're not hard at work advising the RAF, what on Earth have you got planned next?

My immediate future plans – as far as September, anyway – include alpine caving in the Dachstein mountain range in Austria looking to make a connection in to the Hirlatzhohle from above to create one of the world's deepest caves, and cave diving in the Picos de Europa in northern Spain, where we're also looking to try and connect some deep caves together.

Wow. Josh, thanks for talking to us – we all take our hats off to you and your incredible efforts.

Josh and other members of the UK team were invited to meet the PM, and were also presented with a 'Mission Accomplished' placard by the local Thai people.

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